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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESS

from

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, Region 4, Atlanta, Ga.

For Release Upon Receipt

"The Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge in Dare County, North Carolina, is an imperishable insurance policy guaranteeing the continued presence of waterfowl in the Manteo-Pea Island-Cape Hatteras and Albemarle and Pamlico Sound region," James Silver, Regional Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at Atlanta, Ga., declared today in announcing that the refuge would hold open house during National Wildlife Restoration Week, March 18-24.

Individuals and private organizations who wish to visit the refuge may make arrangements by getting in touch with Manager W. H. Hills, at the refuge headquarters in Manteo, Mr. Silver suggested.

With an area of approximately 6,000 acres, the Pea Island Refuge was established by Executive Order in 1938 primarily for the protection of an important feeding ground of the Greater Snow goose and also for the preservation of a residual brood stock of Canada geese. This refuge is one of 275 now administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service throughout the United States, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii.

"The national wildlife refuge system plays an important role in the conservation of our wildlife resources," stated Mr. Silver. "Since the establishment of these areas there has been a decided return of species that had been close to extinction. While all wildlife refuges protect the many forms of wildlife found on the sanctuary, each area is usually particularly beneficial to certain birds or mammals. Pea Island, with its concentration of Snow geese, is an excellent example."

Purchasing land on which to establish a refuge is only a beginning, Mr. Silver declared. Adequate food, water and good cover conditions must be provided. For instance, Snow geese are peculiar feeders. They depend almost entirely on the roots of three-square bulrush and saltmarsh cordgrass. In fact, they denude hundreds of acres annually planted to this feed. Because they employ so much energy in seeking these roots, their feeding ground is literally uprooted and sometimes it takes several seasons for the vegetation to grow again. Part of the work of the Pea Island refuge, therefore, is the building of fresh-water ponds to develop food plants for the waterfowl during their winter stay."

Although the water levels of the impoundments vary in relation to the amount of rainfall, this does not seriously interfere with the natural

growth of marsh and aquatic plants. Along the North Carolina coast, as Mr. Silver pointed out, many of the water plants are dormant during the hot summer weather but grow actively in the spring and early summer and again in the later summer and fall.

Low water levels in the summer do not mean that no food will be available for the ducks when they arrive in the fall. The two ponds on the refuge, totalling about 750 acres, not only furnish food for waterfowl but are used as nesting grounds by black ducks, gadwalls, and occasionally blue winged teal.

One means of creating additional feeding grounds for Snow geese as well as Canada geese is to burn off the old growth of marsh grass and make it possible for the geese to puddle out the roots they enjoy for food. For this reason a definite control program of burning marsh lands is followed on portions of the Pea Island refuge and other refuge areas along the coast so as to supply essential green browse and make the plant roots more readily available.

In the fall migration down the Atlantic coast, Snow geese generally stop first near Fortescue, New Jersey, and range from there down the coast, making stops at Bombay Hook, Delaware, Assateague Island and Back Back, in Virginia, and then to Pea Island. In all of these localities, the Fish and Wildlife Service has established national wildlife refuges.

Their movements down the coast, as well as shuttling back and forth between refuges during the fall and winter months are governed by weather conditions and the available food supply, Mr. Silver pointed out. When food is exhausted in a Virginia refuge area, Pea Island is likely to have more visitors.

The Pea Island refuge is also the terminus for a flock of Canada geese. Flocks of these birds migrate as individual groups and use separate wintering grounds. A succession of poor breeding seasons in the north, coupled with excessive hunting on the wintering grounds, could easily wipe out a goose colony, Mr. Silver asserted.

"If we want to assure the perpetuation of these colonies, we can do it only by regulating and establishing rest areas where the geese will have some respite from gunners. Pea Island provides that respite for geese using that area."

In what numbers Canada and Snow geese use the Pea Island refuge area as a wintering ground are indicated by the following figures: Estimates for Canada geese, made in January of each year, show 6,515 in 1938; 8,200 in 1939; 9,600 in 1940; 10,000 in 1941, 1942 and 1943; and 12,000 in 1944.

In December 1936, an estimated 3,000 Snow geese were seen on Bodie Island, in the vicinity of the refuge. On the refuge area 4,000 were estimated in February 1937 and 8,000 in December 1937; 8,000 in January 1938 and 2,000 in December 1938; 1,500 in January 1939; 6,000 to 8,000 in January 1940; 10,000 to 11,000 in February 1940 (the largest number ever seen to that date); 5,000 in December 1940; 4,000 in January 1941; and 10,000 in January 1942.

At this time drought conditions resulted in the reduction of food on the refuge and a deficiency of aquatics was noted on the Sound. Although the heavy concentration of geese reduced the cordgrass stands, there was no evidence of the birds suffering from a lack of food, Mr. Silver emphasized.

During December 1943, an estimated 15,000 used the refuge, with the number increasing to 20,000 during part of January 1944. On December 5, 1944, 2,000 birds were on the area.

Because the feeding areas on which the birds concentrate for feeding and resting are so accessible to the public traveling through the refuge at all hours, constant observation and patrol is necessary to protect the birds from violators.

In response to inquiries from some of these travelers about the apparent "unhealthy" condition of geese which failed to go north with the main flock and which are still on the refuge area during the summer months, Mr. Silver said, "Lead poisoning is the answer in most all cases. Pea Island is home base for all the birds shot at and missed during the hunting season, and these cripples constitute the majority of the summer boarders. Many of these birds finally die from their injuries; many we have been able to save."

Rich in bird life, the Pea Island refuge answers every requirement of a desirable waterfowl sanctuary. In addition, the development work, which has included the construction of "sand fences" which act as a sea wall to prevent unnecessary flooding of adjoining territory, has been particularly beneficial to the region because it has saved the beaches for public recreation.

"The Federal Government's wildlife refuge program is paying dividends in more ways than one," concluded Mr. Silver. "The hunter finds more birds and mammals to hunt; the trapper, who gains his livelihood from the marshes, finds more fur animals each season; and the general outdoor enthusiast sees more animals in the forests and parks."

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